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Uproar over Education Department's Decision to Re-open Schools

By Rochelle Cooke

In an online briefing held today, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) gave a presentation on how children would be reintegrated into the school environment. Parents are not happy about it.

According to the presentation the school calendar would be adjusted so that schools open on 4 May 2020 for teachers and staff. Grades 7 and 12 learners will possibly return on 6 May 2020, followed by other grades at later dates. The DBE presentation also stated that lost work would be recovered through shortening the June school holidays, and that a maximum of 40 learners are to be allowed in classes.

Classrooms will be sanitised prior to the start of the school day, hands will be sanitised when entering the classroom, learners' movement from one class to another will be limited and there will be no clustering of desks in classrooms, according to the Department. With regards to transport, the DBE will be working with the Department of Transport to ensure that buses are sanitised prior to the start of the trip, hands will be sanitised before entering and the distance between learners on buses will be managed. It was also said that wearing of masks throughout the day will be compulsory. Masks will be given to learners and teachers.

DBE says all learners and educators will be screened by checking their temperature at the re-opening of schools, starting with Grades 7 and 12. Learners or staff members that present with raised temperature will then be considered for isolation and testing.

There are a lot of factors which seem not to have been considered. Masks are very uncomfortable; so learners and teachers may not wear them throughout the day. Most of our public school classrooms are quite small so social distancing is unrealistic. Overcrowding in classes and transport will be an issue. Children like sharing, so the exchange of objects and food is inevitable.

Parents are also criticising the strategy. Parents say that it makes no sense to send learners to school so soon, especially since there has still not been any decline in infections. They also don't believe that children will adhere to the protocols. The general opinion on this plan is that it is very premature and could potentially be a disaster. Parents are reluctant to send their kids to school due to the risk. Children might contract the coronavirus at school and bring it back home. Most children in the public school sector live in locations, informal settlements and rural areas. These are places where the virus can spread rapidly.

When the Department announced its plans, there was an immediate uproar from the public and from institutions of education, learning and training, who expressed worries and concerns. The Tebeila Institute for Leadership, Education, Governance and Training and the African Institute for Human Rights and Constitutional Litigation lodged an urgent application to prevent the Department of Basic Education from re-opening schools under Level 4 of the Lockdown at the Polokwane High Court.

The application was struck off the roll by the High Court on the grounds that it lacked the jurisdiction to make a ruling but Tebeila has reportedly said that they will be taking the

matter up in the Constitutional Court on an urgent basis. The Education Department has since shifted its dates to re-open schools for learners from 4 May to 1 June 2020.

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